

STANDUP AND SYNC

How do you turn good standup instructors into good instructors for synchronous e-learning?

That's what a reader wants to know. Here's what you said:

Try the simple, direct approach: Stand up when you teach live online courses, says Bill Wissore (bwissore@quixnet.net).

Instructors "can use a long cord on their headset or use a wireless headset," says Wissore. He trains instructors to use a wireless mouse called Trackman Live (\$60) from Logitech International of Romanel, Switzerland.

You'll also need "a fairly large monitor," notes Wissore, production director and manager of distance-learning services with DoggettData Inc., a Richardson, Texas, e-learning provider.

Letting presenters roam as though they're in front of a classroom helps to "maintain the level of energy necessary to keep online learners involved," claims Wissore.

Another key factor is to help instructors get "completely at ease" with the teaching application they use.

Wissore requires instructors in training to demonstrate use of every feature of the software.

"It takes a lot of planning and practice," says Wissore, to learn how to turn the floor over to the next speaker and how to use text chat, whiteboard and breakout sessions.

When those steps go smoothly, learning is "more interactive, and learners stay involved much longer."

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Some standup instructors won't ever be good online instructors, he concedes. The technology may always elude them, or they may never be able to do without body-language, eye-contact feedback from participants.

But if your instructors are going to make it, "the one most important ingredient is practice," says Wissore. "Practice with each other, practice with other instructors and practice with students."

Student involvement comes more quickly when the instructor is confident, says Wissore, "and isn't continually saying, 'OK, let me try this one.' "

Encouraging live online instructors to stand and move does indeed help, agrees Jennifer Perena (jenper@nortelnetworks.com).

"Believe me, this really comes across in the presentation," says Perena, technical trainer in Rochester, N.Y., with telecommunications-equipment maker Nortel Networks Corp.

Here's another piece of advice from Perena: "Attend some virtual courses!" she says.

Some synchronous-learning software providers offer online classes to help build e-learning instruction skills. "This is a great starting point to experience a knowledgeable instructor," says Perena.

Moreover, "it is imperative that all e-learning instructors have a good understanding of what their e-learners will be going through," she adds.

Perena also suggests that trainers work closely with e-learning developers in creating e-courses.

And instructors must come to class prepared with "more information than the class would require in order" to answer learner questions.

Perena limits e-classes to two hours, so "quick access to more information for answers is critical," she says.

RECORD YOURSELF

How did Perena make the transition to e-learning instructor? She recorded her first presentations for herself, and other trainers, to play back and critique.

"The recordings made me realize my first time out that I was speaking too fast, was not giving enough pauses and was generally very boring," confesses Perena.

So she added intonation and longer pauses, to let participants react and ask questions.

Another Perena addition -- more humor, "which ultimately helped keep people involved when I delivered my first live course," she says.

Take heart, online-instructor wannabes. Good standup instructors "already have 80% or more of the skills necessary to succeed in an e-learning environment," concludes Perena.

Distance-learning specialist Janet Bernhards (JBernhards@aol.com), whose firm is Training Alternatives in Springfield, Va., suggests these steps for moving instructors online:

- o Look for good standup instructors who WANT to try using a synchronous tool and who look forward to a challenge.
- o Give them an orientation on the software. Get them familiar with its features. Walk them through creating accounts, enrolling learners, installing downloads and the like.
- o Have them observe good synchronous instructors.
- o Set up some practice time with "friendly participants" -- perhaps peers or colleagues-- who would themselves benefit from the training, to "give a more real flavor" to the exercise.
- o For the first few classes, assign an assistant facilitator or co-presenter to help the instructor-- watching for questions, clearing text fields, giving the floor to participants, selecting tools and handling technical problems. "This takes some pressure off of the instructor and lets the instructor focus on content, listening to participants and giving feedback," says Bernhards. "Most instructors become more comfortable over time, and you can phase out the assistant. It depends on how frequently the instructor teaches."
- o Some companies provide a facilitator at all sessions, she notes -- especially when a subject-matter expert does a one-time presentation. Get your SMEs some practice. They should rehearse at least the first 20 minutes of the presentation, as well as transitions, their closing, and "anything else that might be tricky," says Bernhards, such as application-sharing or breakout rooms.
- ?? Finally, "Make sure you have a good design-- which is, of course, needs-based," says Bernhards. "An outstanding classroom instructor can often pull off a poorly designed course in the classroom. However, this is harder to do in a synchronous environment." The designer should know the delivery software's capabilities. And the design should include variety, should appeal to different learning styles, and should keep participants engaged.